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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
SUN-TIMES

FEB 27, 1977

M - 554,334

S - 667,850

Carter's CIA problem

Jimmy Carter isn't the first President to stumble over the problem of the Central Intelligence Agency. Yet, despite some fuzziness on the issue at his press conference last week, there's some reason to think Carter might gain long-needed control over the shadowy, dangerous spy organization.

Unfortunately, Carter was ambiguous under questioning. The confusion stems in part from his saying that he had "not found anything illegal or improper" in the CIA's activities, but then refusing to explain why he shut off secret payments to Jordan's King Hussein and perhaps other foreign leaders.

That leaves the public with doubts about the CIA and about the intelligence oversight

board, set up under President Gerald R. Ford, which was to prevent illegal activities.

Yet there was no ambiguity on one point. Carter said flatly that "the impropriety or the illegality does not exist on any ongoing CIA operations." That word "ongoing" raises hope that the President, with his stress on ethical government, has rooted out past ethical abuses.

Adm. Stansfield Turner, the new CIA director, raised hope a bit, too. He said last week that he understands the problems of operating a secret agency in a democratic system and that Carter "wants to be ensured that the foreign intelligence work of all agencies... is being conducted strictly in accordance with the law and American values."

Turner said he would resign before "carrying out an immoral or illegal action." Asked if he could think of a situation in which he would approve an assassination of a foreign leader, Turner said, "Not in peacetime." Those who think the intelligence-gathering operation ought to be limited to intelligence-gathering won't be satisfied.

Nor will others be reassured by such statements, however strongly expressed. The past has taught that a leader's strong expression need not guarantee truth.

But as long as spy work is a bitter necessity in a dangerous world, a CIA will be needed. The public must judge the character of its leaders and give to them some measure of trust in secrecy matters. Carter pledged to "do the best I can" to make sure intelligence agencies act legally. Given his performance so far, he seems to merit such trust.

